

Help Keep Mom Smiling: Cigna Study Finds Majority of Pregnant Women Suffer Oral Health Problems, But 43% Don't Get Dental Checkups

BLOOMFIELD, Conn.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Preventive dental checkups are important throughout one's life, and, arguably, even more essential during pregnancy. All infections in the mother, including tooth decay and gum disease, may pose a risk to the baby's health as well. However, a [national survey](#) released today by Cigna (NYSE:CI) finds that 43% of women don't go for a dental checkup while expecting even though 76% admit to suffering from oral health problems during pregnancy, such as bleeding gums or toothaches.

Hormonal changes during pregnancy can worsen certain oral health conditions such as gingivitis and more serious gum disease. [The Cigna survey](#) found that only 55% of women rate their oral health as very good or excellent during pregnancy, a drop from 63% prepregnancy. Without a checkup, women might not even be aware of problems beginning to affect their teeth and gums. More than a third (36%) of expectant mothers admit that it has been more than a year since their last preventive dental visit. Cost is the primary reason why pregnant women say they skip dental checkups, even among those with dental benefits.

"[Dental checkups](#) are so important that most dental benefit plans cover preventive care visits every six months with no or low out-of-pocket costs. Some dental benefit plans even have special maternity programs with additional services like extra cleanings or discounts on oral health prescriptions," said Dr. Miles Hall, Cigna's chief clinical dental director and licensed dentist.

"Small cavities or early stages of gum disease may not be painful, but both get worse if left untreated. Regular dental checkups are critical for identifying and treating problems before they get more complicated and more expensive to treat - the very situation everyone wants to avoid," adds Dr. Hall.

Dental Benefit Plan Maternity Programs

The survey of expecting and new mothers found that those who took advantage of a dental maternity program through their dental benefit plan had better oral health habits than those who did not participate or did not have a program available to them. The survey found that:

- 62% of women brush their teeth at least twice a day. That percentage climbs to 76% for those who are participating or who have participated in a dental benefit plan maternity program.
- 48% of women floss at least once a day. That percentage surges to 81% for women who are participating or who have participated in a dental benefit plan maternity program.

The survey suggests that these improvements in dental hygiene habits may be why 74% of women who are participating or have participated in a dental benefit plan maternity program rate their oral health as very good or excellent compared to 55% of pregnant women overall.

The Physician's Influence

Oral health ties to overall wellness, however many medical professionals don't include oral health as part of their patient discussions. While 97% of women said that they saw their medical doctor/obstetrician during their pregnancy as frequently as directed, only 44% said that oral health was mentioned in those visits. Yet these discussions may have a significant impact. Compared to other expectant mothers, women whose doctors talked about their oral health during pregnancy are about twice as likely to:

- have a dental checkup while pregnant (77% vs. 41%)

- read materials about the importance of oral health (87% vs. 42%)

"The number of missed opportunities to discuss oral health as part of medical checkups for both mother and baby is an eye opener," said Dr. Stacie Rivers, Cigna medical director for maternity programs and a board certified obstetrician and gynecologist. "There is a clear action step for physicians, and significant gains to be made when there is an integrated effort to help patients understand the connection between oral health and overall wellness."

The effects of the doctor's influence seems to last beyond delivery -- while only 43% of new mothers have had a dental checkup since giving birth, that percentage climbs to 63% for women whose doctors discussed oral health during maternity visits. Postpartum dental visits are also important, particularly as dental hygiene habits may slip once baby arrives. More than one-third of new mothers (36%) say they are brushing and flossing less frequently than before the baby - many blaming lack of time.

Similarly, pediatricians can help babies start the path to good oral health. Half of new mothers (50%) clean their infant's gums daily, but nearly two-thirds (65%) do if the pediatrician discussed their baby's oral health. However, 34% of new mothers say the pediatrician has not discussed care of their child's teeth and gums with them.

Oral health information for pregnant women, new mothers and their families can be found by visiting www.cigna.com/dental-resources.

About the Survey

[*Healthy Smiles for Mom and Baby: Insights into Expecting and New Mothers' Oral Health Habits*](#) is a national survey of 801 pregnant women and new mothers (within the past 12 months) between the ages of 21 to 45. Half have dental benefits. The survey was fielded August 12 to August 16, 2015 by M/A/R/C Research. The sampling error is +/- 3.5% at a 95 percent confidence level.

About Cigna

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